



Teacher leadership during COVID-19

TEACHERS HAVE LED FROM THE FRONT TO HELP STUDENTS COPE WITH THE PANDEMIC. [ASHOK PANDEY](#) DISCUSSES THE FINDINGS FROM A RECENT STUDY UNDERTAKEN WITH SUPPORT FROM HIS SCHOOL.

The pandemic has disrupted our health, livelihood, and education. As far as education is concerned, it has brought sudden and unprecedented learning loss and discontinuity. According to a World Bank report, the cumulative effect of learning losses in India alone is worth \$400 billion.

To prevent sweeping learning loss, teachers all over the world adapted quickly to online teaching and fixing the problems associated with it. They put themselves up to the task with little preparation and self-provisioned resources. Love for their students and courage to embrace the new normal drove them to reach out to their students, even when exposure to public scrutiny loomed. This single act of the global community of teachers helped billions of children cope with the trauma and fear of the pandemic. Teachers stepped into the shoes of counsellors to support the mental health and socio-emotional well-being of their students.

As the weeks and months went by, the teaching community readjusted to the reality of remote teaching, learning from their everyday experience. Classroom management lexicon now included ‘mute’ and ‘unmute’, a combination of synchronous and asynchronous modes of teaching, numerous annotations, and upping the ante in the face of unauthorised entries and harmful pranks. As we look back, there are many lessons to learn. The survival instinct and crisis management of the early days have given way to skilful management of classes, making them more engaging and active. Assignments and assessments look far less daunting than they did before. The transition to remote learning meant embracing the uncomfortable, and that proved a good recipe in striving for success in a crisis.

Of course, online teaching benefitted only those who had access to appropriate online learning systems. A large number of children had to make do with low efficacy

alternatives such as WhatsApp messages, TV, and radio lessons. Many schools delivered learning kits to the homes of learners. Alongside, individual innovations by teachers played a crucial role in mitigating losses and preventing disruption of learning for the vulnerable.

An emerging phenomenon, distributed leadership, became the response for tackling the educational challenges of this crisis. It is noteworthy to observe that leadership, initiative, and innovations emerged from within teachers and not from the top leadership team. With support from the Ahlcon Group of Schools, I have conducted five focus group discussions with 20 teachers in Ahlcon and other schools to investigate the rise of teacher leadership during the pandemic, and its enabling factors. Research taken at the school level helps school leaders and management to take decisions on initiatives that support our teachers and students.

Teacher leadership has been redefined, reflecting a shift from conventional positional roles – coordinators, faculty heads, headmistresses, or vice-principals – ascribing power and authority to the holder. Teacher leadership is now determined by the proactive roles that teachers play, initiatives they undertake, and the support they render to leadership, students, and parents. Teacher leaders are the ‘go-to’ teachers and retain the respect and trust of colleagues. The pandemic has offered new avenues, and many teachers have demonstrated that they are resourceful during a crisis, leading content design, facilitating capacity building as peer leaders, mentoring, and readily adopting and catalysing change within an organisation.

How have teachers displayed leadership while collaborating with peers and parents to tackle the COVID-19 crisis? Teachers were asked to briefly give good examples of playing a significant leading role in collaborating with parents/caregivers

to tackle challenges posed by the pandemic.

What are the enabling factors for teacher leadership? Teachers were encouraged to share key elements/measures at the school-level that supported them in practising leadership behaviours, for example, instances of support from school management and colleagues.

What are the challenges and barriers to pursuing leadership while collaborating with the learning community during the ongoing crisis? The idea was to identify the main obstacles and challenges for teachers to collaborate effectively with parents or caregivers in coping with pandemic challenges.

How can schools support teacher leadership? Teachers were asked to recommend how they can be better supported, particularly with regard to motivation and capacities, to take the lead during and beyond the ongoing crisis.

Responses from the teachers were found informative by the school management. Some of the ways through which teachers displayed leadership included creating awareness about the pandemic, actively connecting with students and parents, reaching out to the community, and building local resilience. To give a few examples, teachers created virtual campus tours to connect with new joiners. They engaged in training on hygiene and online etiquette. On the other hand, inviting families to join virtual classrooms, and day-to-day conversations helped eliminate the scepticism of remote learning. They encouraged students to create self-help blogs that established a sense of belonging, well-being, and solidarity within the student community. All along, they were open to learning. Teachers have learnt from the least expected sources – students, family members, colleagues, and open sources.

Teacher leaders received support from caring leadership, who gave them hope, stability, compassion, and faith for tackling difficult situations together. Lowering

expectations from teachers, asynchronous communications, well-being concerns, joint articulation of goal resetting were cited as significant enablers. Leadership's recognition of a teacher's potential and support to unleash it, kept enthusiasm high.

There were barriers and challenges as well. Dipping levels of motivation, feelings of dejection emanating from the thought 'when will it end?', frustrating internet behaviour, technical glitches, and the fear of failure were nerve-racking. Competing demands from family, well-being concerns accentuated by news of friends and family testing COVID-positive, and the challenges of collaborating remotely with colleagues were often overwhelming. The major challenge was to embrace the uncomfortable, maintain poise, and balance work-life responsibilities.

The strongest recommendation comes from revisiting parental engagement. Giving parents a platform to ask questions, developing understanding, engaging them consistently, restructuring the relationship with parents – teaming up with them instead of opening fault lines came across as new terms of engagement. Teachers felt that there is a value in parental cooperation and partnership in learning. Student-led discussions, group reading, and ensuring equity and excellence for each child are other items in the wish list of the teacher leaders who participated in the study. Teachers are prepared to learn, invest in themselves, seize opportunities, and rise to the occasion. School leaderships' investment in teachers' capacity building as a strategy for long time asset formation should attract attention.

COVID-19 has brought radical changes to the way we teach and learn. Participant experience suggests that critical initiatives are not always the preserve of the senior leadership team. Teachers can provide leadership at their day-to-day work by displaying a number of leadership

behaviours. Thus, self-supported studies that reassess initiatives, access to online resources, teacher-generated material, and mentoring are crucial to the growth of teacher leadership. Accepting change, in-house accreditation of professional learning, and a participative caring leadership can transform the work culture landscape of an educational institution. **T**

Disclaimer: The names used in the photos are not real names.

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